

ISSUE AREA 3

EDUCATION (PRE-K – 12TH GRADE)

CHICAGO'S ENROLLMENT CRISIS SERIES

This issue brief is part of Kids First Chicago's second installment on Chicago's enrollment crisis focused on parent-led solutions to address the crisis. In January 2022, we released *Chicago's Enrollment Crisis Part One: Examining Root Causes*, which analyzed the primary drivers of Chicago Public Schools' (CPS) enrollment decline using available school enrollment, population, and census report data.

Chicago's Enrollment Crisis Part Two: Adopting Parent-led Solutions is the culmination of nearly two years of research and discussion with Chicago families, who offered their time and insights to help make the city a better place for families like theirs. For more information, visit kidsfirstchicago.org/enrollment-solutions.



ABOUT KIDS FIRST CHICAGO

Kids First Chicago’s mission is to dramatically improve education for Chicago’s children by ensuring their families are the respected authorities on what their kids need and decision-makers in their kids’ education. We do this by partnering with families to support them in gaining the resources, access, and voice they need to achieve their vision for their children.

We imagine a Chicago where Black and Brown parents have a prominent voice in shaping their communities so that every child has access to a world-class education—the kind that opens the doors to new opportunities in college, career, and life. An education where **100% of our students graduate with the confidence, knowledge, and skills to shape our city for the better.**

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OVERVIEW

Chicago households are educated or employed by CPS

“I know many families who have left the city due to frustration with the quality of education in CPS.” - MEGAN ASP

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) plays a huge role in Chicagoans’ daily lives; **at least 1 in 5 Chicago households are either educated or employed by CPS.**

CPS is the fourth largest school district in the U.S. It educates over 320,000 students and a disproportionately large share of high-needs students in Illinois: CPS serves about 18% of the K-12 students in Illinois, but nearly one-third of all the state’s low-income and English Learner students, as well as 40% of all housing-insecure students.

It takes about 45,000 employees to operate a district of this size and need. This amounts to approximately 30% of all government positions in Illinois, equating to more government positions than it takes to run some of the largest cities in the U.S., including Philadelphia and Houston.¹

PERCEPTIONS OF CPS DAMPEN CITY’S ATTRACTIVENESS TO FAMILIES

According to a 2023 Harris Poll survey, only 3 in 10 Cook County residents (31%) rate the area’s public education system positively (i.e., good, excellent). Almost the same number (28%) rate the local school system as poor. Locals’ dim view of their schools are made clearer when comparing them to other public-school districts nationally: Only 13% of Cook County residents consider local public schools to be better than other areas in the U.S., while more than one-third (36%) consider them to be worse. Cook County residents hold little optimism for CPS’ improvement. They generally (48%) expect the local public education system to remain in its current state over the next five years. A quarter (25%) think the schools will worsen, while fewer (20%) think they will improve.

Source: “Harris Poll: CPS sets an ambitious path for success, but public holds little optimism for improvement,” *Crain’s Chicago Business*, March 27, 2023.

In our workshops, parents contended that the educational experience in CPS, from preschool through 12th grade, significantly influences families’ decisions to stay in or move to Chicago. Concerns raised by families spanned several areas, with the most prominent being the quality of education, school environment, sense of community, and funding.

In terms of education quality, parents emphasize the need for diverse and enriching learning opportunities, such as advanced placement courses and career readiness initiatives. They believe these programs enhance students’ academic and career prospects, boosting their confidence in the CPS system. The role of high-quality, engaging teachers was also highlighted as vital to their children’s education, with a focus on teacher training and retention.

School safety, encompassing both physical and social safety, is another priority for parents. They advocate for measures to ensure strong student well-being, well-maintained facilities, and a culture of diversity and inclusivity. Parental involvement was also identified as key to fostering a safer and more effective learning environment.

Lastly, parents point to funding as a significant factor in CPS’s enrollment challenges. They note that sufficient funding – both at individual schools and at the district-level – is essential for attracting and retaining families, as it directly impacts student outcomes.

“It is only the parents who can make the schools change. Parents are powerhouses.” - OVETTA BROWN

¹ K1C analysis of Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances, 2021, Individual Unit Data File; 2022 State & Local Government Employment & Payroll, Individual Unit Data File

RECOMMENDATIONS

FUND CHICAGO'S SCHOOLS ADEQUATELY AND EQUITABLY

WHAT IS TITLE I?

Title I is a federal education program that provides additional funding to school districts with low-income students.

With COVID-19 relief dollars running out after FY2025, the federal government should move to triple funding for its Title I program; the State of Illinois should fulfill its promise to fully-fund K-12 education by 2027; and Chicago Public Schools (CPS) should rebuild its student-based budgeting system to fund schools based on community and student need.

Parents participating in our workshops expressed a strong belief that the federal government needs to increase funding for education, particularly through Title I funding to support lower-income students.

Additionally, parents were critical of Springfield legislators who, in 2017, promised that all school districts, including CPS, would be fully-funded by 2027. Recent estimates indicate that at its current pace of funding, the State of Illinois will not meet its obligation until seven years after what is required by statute.²

“Our neighborhood schools continue to be underfunded, which translates to over-crowded classrooms; the loss of specials like art, music, and a librarian; classrooms without proper instructional materials; and school buildings that have a plethora of issues like broken intercom systems, lack of functional heat and air conditioning, and other maintenance issues.” - CORTNEY RITSEMA

Finally, parents voiced concerns that CPS' practice of allocating the same amount of funding per student, regardless of individual student needs, is inherently inequitable. They argued that this approach fails to address the varied and specific requirements of students, particularly those in disinvested communities.

Increased funding for PreK-12 education directly translates to improved student outcomes, as it provides for better resourced schools and a more comprehensive educational program, thereby elevating the overall quality of the learning experience.³

In a review examining 13 studies of the impact of increased funding on schools nationwide or in multiple states, 12 found that spending more money meant statistically significant benefits for students, including rising test scores and higher graduation rates.⁴

“The needs of our students are not equal. There is a concentration of needs in certain areas, but the funding is the same for every student regardless of need.”

- ANGEL ALVAREZ

WHAT PARENTS SHARED

- They identified a clear connection between well-resourced schools and an improved educational experience for their child.
- Many believe more equitable funding addresses the vast economic disparities across the city and is key to supporting students and schools with the greatest need.

² Center for Tax and Budget Accountability, “[Fully Funding the Evidence-Based Formula: Volume VIII.](#)” October 2023.

³ Kira Barrett, “[The Evidence is Clear: More Money For Schools Means Better Student Outcomes.](#)” National Education Association, August 2018.

⁴ Matt Barnum, “[Does money matter for schools? Why one researcher says the question is 'essentially settled'.](#)” *Chalkbeat*, December 17, 2018.

DRAMATICALLY INCREASE FOCUS ON – AND INVESTMENT IN – SCHOOL CLIMATE REFORM

Chicago Public Schools should dramatically increase its focus on and investment in school climate reform as a school improvement strategy to support students, parents, and school personnel learning and working together to create safer, more supportive and engaging schools.

“Los niños y jóvenes deben aprender de más culturas, hay bastante diversidad de costumbres. Deben aprender a tolerarse, coexistir y aceptarse unos a otros.” - LUIS QUEZADA

Translation. "Children and young people must learn from more cultures, there is quite a diversity of customs. They must learn to tolerate, coexist, and accept each other."

Research has demonstrated the powerful effect positive school climate can have, including increasing students' motivation to learn; mitigating the negative impact of socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty and exposure to trauma, on academic success; contributing to less aggression, violence, harassment and bullying; and the vital role it can play in the positive life development of young people.⁵

WHAT PARENTS SHARED

- They believe “school climate” improvements can be a catch- all opportunity to improve cultural competency, teach tolerance of various identities, and ensure all school-based personnel are trauma-informed and responsive to students' mental health and socio- emotional needs.
- Several noted how school climate is important to address ongoing bullying issues at schools.
- Some highlighted how school climate improvements need to include more parent presence at the school.
- Several expressed concerns that “school climate” improvement was overly broad as a concept. They suggested making improvements more targeted. Relatedly, some parents expressed curiosities about who and how changes in school climate are implemented.

WHAT IS SCHOOL CLIMATE?

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. It encompasses the norms, values, and expectations that ensure a safe, supportive, and engaging environment for students, teachers, and staff. This climate is shaped by interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures. A positive school climate is characterized by respect, trust, and a sense of belonging, and it's linked to improved academic achievement, student well-being, and lower rates of negative behaviors like bullying.

Essentially, it's the overall experience and atmosphere of the school as perceived by those within it.

⁵ Thapa, Amrit, et al. [“A Review of School Climate Research.”](#) *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 83, no. 3, 2013, pp. 357–85.

EXPAND INVESTMENT IN 21ST CENTURY COMMUNITY SCHOOLS “NEIGHBORHOOD HUB” MODEL

“Me encantaría que todas las escuelas de nuestras comunidades fueran escuelas comunitarias donde brindarían a todos los padres acceso a diferentes recursos, incluido apoyo para solicitar beneficios, ofrecer clases de inglés y brindar capacitación a los padres. Esto ayudaría a aumentar la confianza, la participación y la implicación de los padres.” - ANA LORENZANA

Translation. "I would love for all the schools in our communities to be community schools where they provide all parents access to different resources, including support to apply for benefits, offering English classes, and providing training for parents. This would help increase parents' trust, participation, and involvement."

The City of Chicago and CPS should expand the number of community schools, ensure existing community schools are sufficiently and sustainably funded, and innovate the current community schools models by further integrating other city agencies (e.g., parks, public health, planning, public works, workforce) and the private sector to create a permanent table for sustained collaboration.

There are notable case studies that exemplify how community schools can help students and parents thrive. In Austin, Texas, Northeast Early College High School was one of several area community schools to create a family resource center and partner with local nonprofits to provide health services, parenting classes, and student after-school programs. School enrollment doubled after a year, and graduation rates rose from 48% to 98% in five years.⁶

Evaluations of Community Schools programming in Chicago over 11 years have consistently shown positive effects on attendance and disciplinary incidents, as well as increases in annual GPA and standardized test scores among some cohorts of schools. Positive effects associated with enrollment in community schools were related to school-day attendance-related outcomes, including high school students who were chronically absent 14-15% less often and had fewer numbers of suspension days.⁷

WHAT PARENTS SHARED

- They felt that increasing the number of community schools and better-supporting existing community schools is important for both the schools and the broader community.
- Many noted how community schools provide opportunities to unite communities and increase parent presence in schools. Parents also want a voice in selecting community school partners.
- They believe community schools can do more by providing resources such as internet access, English classes, social services, and can house businesses and function as quasi-community centers.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY SCHOOL?

The community schools strategy centers public schools as hubs for communities and combines a rigorous, relevant educational program with extended learning opportunities, family and community engagement, and an infusion of social services.

Chicago's landscape of community schools has evolved multiple times since 1998, when 50 schools first adopted the strategy. Today, there are roughly 117 full-service community schools in CPS – representing less than 20% of all schools.

⁶ Jennifer S. Vey and Juanita Morales, “[Why local leaders should champion ‘community schools’ to improve student, family, and neighborhood well-being.](#)” Brookings Institution, December 2022.

⁷ Neil Naftzger, PhD, Lauren Stargel, PhD, and Allison Belmont, “[Chicago Public Schools Community Schools Initiative: Findings from an Examination of Initiative Impact among Schools Funded in the FY13 Cohort.](#)” American Institutes for Research, June 2022

EXPAND CHICAGO'S PARENT MENTOR PROGRAM TO EVERY CPS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

“Once a parent is there in the classroom, the students listen more, they participate more. I think it’s a great [program], and I hope it expands to more schools.” - JUANNA BROWN

The State of Illinois, with seed funding from the City of Chicago's philanthropic community, should invest in the expansion of the Parent Mentor Program (PMP) so every CPS elementary school has the option to incubate and implement a PMP.

WHAT IS THE PARENT MENTOR PROGRAM (PMP)?

Created in Chicago, the Parent Mentor Program, consisting primarily of Latina and Black mothers and caregivers, helps fill persistent equity gaps in their children’s schools by helping students in classrooms two hours/day. From this immersive classroom experience – supported by weekly training on instructional practices and community organizing – the PMP cultivates a strong cohort of leaders at each partner school.

“As a parent mentor myself, this is something that greatly benefits the school and the students. It also benefits the parent mentor as well. I have learned so much since I started and it allows me to be more involved in the decisions being made at my child's school.” - ANDREA JUAREZ

The PMP has offered a wide-range of benefits, from the children of parent mentors having higher college graduation rates, to the mentors achieving their own personal goals and being more aware of community resources. Since the PMP was launched⁸:

- 92% of principals and 94% of teachers report that the Parent Mentor Program helped build trust between parents and school staff;
- 57.9% of teachers increased the number of students they worked with one-on-one after having a parent mentor in their classroom;
- 84% of parent mentor graduates have completed or made progress on their personal goals such as gaining employment, learning English, going to college and earning a GED.

WHAT PARENTS SHARED

- There was an overwhelming positive support from parents who know the Parent Mentor Program. They highlighted how PMPs provides teachers and students with additional support and believe that parent presence improves student attention and behavior.
- They believe that by expanding PMP, parent participation in schools will increase. Moreover, many see PMP as a gateway for parents to have access to more educational opportunities that support their personal growth.
- They noted that vetting parents who apply to serve as a mentor is very important to ensure they are a safe and appropriate addition to a classroom.

⁸ Institute for Educational Leadership, [Network Spotlight – Logan Square Neighborhood Association](#), date accessed March 25, 2023.

INVEST IN THE EXPANSION OF PROGRAMS BEYOND THE TRADITIONAL SCHOOL-DAY EXPERIENCE

PROVIDE A TUTOR OPTION FOR EVERY CHILD PERFORMING BELOW GRADE LEVEL

CPS should sustain and scale effective tutoring models through national and local service programs, fellowships, volunteers, and high-quality virtual tutoring, and commit to providing a high-quality tutoring option to every student performing below grade level.

Research indicates that tutoring is remarkably effective at helping students learn, with over 80% of the 96 reviewed studies reporting statistically significant effects.⁹

“Muy necesario la tutoría individual y en grupos pequeños, porque hay niños que en verdad ocupan esa ayuda extra.” - LORENA LOPEZ

Translation. "Individual and small group tutoring is very necessary, because there are children who really need that extra help."

WHAT PARENTS SHARED

- They felt providing tutoring for students is beneficial to the classroom environment and overall learning.
- They noted that tutoring helps both teachers and parents by providing more individualized support to students and fostering greater school engagement with the family.
- They believed tutoring can also have an important positive impact on the socioemotional safety and confidence of students as well as ensuring they are successful in school.
- They agreed parents should be able to opt their child out from receiving tutoring services.

⁹ Andre Nickow, Phillip Oreopoulos, and Vincent Quan. [“Tutoring: A time-tested solution to an unprecedented pandemic.”](#) Brookings Institution. October 2020.

¹⁰ Afterschool Alliance, [“Executive Summary: Afterschool in Communities of Concentrated Poverty,”](#) 2016.

¹¹ Ibid.

OFFER EVERY CHILD AN 8AM-TO-5PM SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

“Working parents desperately need this. Parents have to make financial sacrifices to get their children to school. Sometimes, they take lower paying jobs just because of school hours.” – TIQUITA BREWER

Every CPS school should offer a free or low-cost high-quality before- and after-school care program to better meet the needs of working parents. Public school schedules are based on an antiquated system that relies on two-parent, one-income households. The average school day in Chicago is seven hours. The average workday, however, is not, requiring parents to make tough choices about their income, parental involvement, and child care.

Nationally, only around 45% of all public elementary schools offer before- and after-school care, and schools in the highest hardship communities are less likely to offer after-school programs.¹⁰ Only 24% of children living in high-poverty communities participate in an after-school program, although 56% of children not in an after-school program would be enrolled in one if it were available to them.¹¹

WHAT PARENTS SHARED

- They overwhelmingly support affordable high-quality before- and after-school care programs. And many parents noted that CPS does not provide any transparency as to which schools offer before- and after-school care, and the cost of the programs.
- They noted before- and after-school programs address multiple areas of concern, including the physical safety for the child, parents having to sacrifice employment opportunities to be available for drop-off/pick-up, and the desire to ensure students have access to quality extracurricular activities. They also mentioned that students in before- and after-school programs should be guaranteed a meal when they attend.

26.4%

The teacher "pay penalty"—the gap between the weekly wages of teachers and college graduates working in other professions—grew to a record 26.4% in 2022, an increase from 23.5% in 2021.

SUPPORT, TRAIN, AND PAY TEACHERS LIKE PROFESSIONALS

“Teacher turnover at neighborhood schools in high poverty areas makes it difficult to maintain a high quality of education at these schools.” – MEGAN ASP

Chicago Public Schools (CPS) should expand teacher residency programs to improve new teachers’ skills and by extension, their students’ learning. CPS should also explore putting an end to the huge gap in earnings between the teaching workforce and other college-educated professionals and pay more experienced teachers with a demonstrated track record of excellence at a higher rate.

Teachers who are not adequately prepared to teach and who are not paid professionally may decide to leave the profession. Others may never even consider teaching because of the profession’s relatively flat salary trajectory and because the professional work environment does not match that of other career paths.

Teacher turnover can disrupt learning and make it harder for students to be successful. For example, a study in New York City found that high rates of school-level attrition had a negative effect on student achievement in the grade levels where teachers left.¹²

Despite the critical role educators play in shaping America’s future, their compensation continues to lag significantly behind other professions, as evidenced by the widening wage disparities. Nationally, teacher "pay penalty"—the gap between the weekly wages of teachers and college graduates working in other professions—grew to a record 26.4% in 2022, an increase from 23.5% in 2021.¹³

WHAT PARENTS SHARED

- They believe teachers are indispensable, and both CPS and the broader civic community need to figure out a better method to attract and retain quality teachers.
- Many also want more transparency about what is happening in the classroom and clearer measures regarding teacher track records.

“Our teachers have such an important job and need to be compensated accordingly.” – CORTNEY RITSEMA

¹² Susan Kemper Patrick and Desiree Carver-Thomas, [“Teacher Salaries: A Key Factor in Recruitment and Retention,”](#) Learning Policy Institute, April 14, 2022.

¹³ Sylvia Allegretto, [“Teacher pay penalty still looms large: Trends in teacher wages and compensation through 2022,”](#) Economic Policy Institute, September 2023.

NEARLY 9 IN 10

89% of employers are more likely to hire high school graduates if the students learned more real-world skills

BETTER PREPARE ALL CHICAGO STUDENTS FOR THE JOBS OF THE FUTURE

“Most of the kids going to high school and college don’t know how to get where they want to go. For too many students, career opportunities are hidden to them.” – ANTHONY CALDWELL

CPS, in coordination with the City of Chicago and in partnership with the city’s business community, should launch a new effort to provide all schools with the strategies and resources to expose students to careers and industries, especially in early grades, as well as ensure every student has opportunities to combine college preparatory academics with technical training and workplace experience.

The lack of effective preparation for all students in terms of college and career readiness has resulted in unequal educational, economic, and civic opportunities. This disparity disproportionately affects Black, Latine, and Indigenous students.¹⁴

Career preparation and development provides a lot of benefits for high school students, businesses, and non-profit organizations. 89% of employers are more likely to hire high school graduates if the students learned more real-world skills, according to the 2021 Future of Learning Research Survey.¹⁵

“This could be instrumental in having CPS students be able to compete in the job market with students from all over the country.” – CORTNEY RITSEMA

There is a widely acknowledged understanding, derived from both research and practical experience, about the various aspects of readiness necessary for students to succeed in college and future careers. These include comprehensive academic knowledge in various subjects, vocational training in specific fields or general skills like computer literacy, and modern competencies such as critical thinking and teamwork. Furthermore, students should engage in a diverse array of activities aimed at career readiness. To comprehensively address all these critical components, there needs to be a deliberate and ongoing partnership among educational institutions, higher education, and business, with the government playing a pivotal role.¹⁶

WHAT PARENTS SHARED

- They would like to see more built-in preparation during the school day for students to be successful in college and in their careers. Relatedly, parents said students should be better prepared with life skills and be able to explore different career paths.
- They believe preparation should include a balance of theory and practical strategies and resources that enable students to be successful in a competitive job market.
- Some of the strategies offered by parents to better prepare students include resume writing, mock interviews, financial literacy classes, internships, college preparatory coursework, and increased partnerships with youth development groups to help teach “soft skills”.

¹⁴ Laura Jimenez, “[Preparing American Students for the Workforce of the Future: Ensuring Every Student’s Readiness for College, Career, and Civic Life](#),” Center for American Progress, September 14, 2020.

¹⁵ Tyng Kam, “[Education Prepares Students for Careers of the Future and Helps Businesses](#),” U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, June 24, 2022

¹⁶ Laura Jimenez, “[Preparing American Students for the Workforce of the Future: Ensuring Every Student’s Readiness for College, Career, and Civic Life](#),” Center for American Progress, September 14, 2020.

CONCLUSION: FAMILIES NEED ACTION NOW

Chicago has always been a dynamic tapestry of culture, innovation, and diversity, but we face an urgent challenge. Families, the cornerstone of any thriving society, are leaving our great city. By listening to parents, we can create an environment that attracts and retains families, boosting our city's vibrancy, prosperity, and long-term stability.

Thank you for joining us on this crucial exploration of the issues affecting Chicago's families. Together, we can create a brighter future for our great city.



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LEARN MORE

We invite you to dive deeper into other issue briefs, available for download on our website. Visit kidsfirstchicago.org/enrollment-solutions.

QUESTIONS?

Please contact José Pacas, Hal Woods, or any member of our team at Kids First Chicago to explore our analysis further.

Contact us at kidsfirstchicago.org/our-team.

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